

Ambition, descent, and downfall: Tacitus on Agrippina

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With the establishment of a dynasty in Rome, women in the imperial family necessarily took on a public role, as power was transmitted through family connections. But the precise nature of that role – quite how they should behave and in what sense they might themselves be entitled to power – remained contested issues into the second century A.D. when Tacitus was writing. Often conflicts within the family or between factions are mediated through criticism of women's behaviour. These tensions are particularly apparent in Tacitus' handling of Agrippina the Elder (daughter of Augustus' only child Julia), a woman evidently popular in her own right, whose marriage to the glamorous military commander Germanicus (grandson of Augustus' wife Livia) served to unite the Julians and the Claudians.

Girl power

Agrippina first enters Tacitus' narrative in the wake of Augustus' death in A.D. 14, where she is presented as already the object of Livia's resentment. Tacitus' judgement of her is positive – though with reservations: 'Agrippina ... was rather irascible, but by her virtue and love for her husband she could turn her indomitable spirit to good effect' (*Annals* 1.33). Soon afterwards, Roman soldiers mutiny in Germany, demanding better pay – and urging Germanicus (their commander) to seize the empire from his stepfather Tiberius. Germanicus stays loyal to the new emperor but, struggling to quell the mutiny, decides that women and children should evacuate the camp. Agrippina, though pregnant, is only with difficulty persuaded to leave, declaring to her husband (*Ann.* 1.40) that 'she was a descendant of the divine Augustus and not his inferior when facing danger'. Tacitus wonders whether such masculine bravery isn't out of place.

The following year, Roman troops are hard-pressed by German forces. Those who escape over the Rhine are, it is said, only prevented from destroying the bridge in their wake (thus cutting off their fellow Romans) by Agrippina's intervention. Tacitus comments (1.69): 'this great-hearted woman took upon herself the duties of a leader during those days, and gave out clothes or dressings to those

among the soldiers who were in need or wounded.' While Tacitus hints that Agrippina may be going beyond her proper role and indeed assuming duties more appropriate to her husband, the interpretation of this episode takes a much more sinister turn, when it is focalized through Tiberius: 'commanders were being left with nothing to do, he mused, when a woman inspected the troops, appeared before the standards, and sought to give hand-outs'. Tiberius' feelings of resentment are amplified by Sejanus, his increasingly powerful praetorian prefect, already (according to Tacitus, at least) plotting the downfall of Germanicus and Agrippina.

The growing hostility of Tiberius and his mother Livia towards Germanicus and Agrippina seems even to precipitate the death of Germanicus, allegedly poisoned when on a mission to Syria. On his deathbed (suspecting he has fallen victim to Livia's agents), Germanicus beseeches his friends to show the soon-to-be-bereft Agrippina to the Roman people as 'the deified Augustus' granddaughter, who was also my wife'. Her descent appears a source of strength and security. But he also warns Agrippina herself (*Ann.* 2.72) to 'set aside her pride, submit to fortune's cruelty and, on returning to Rome, avoid provoking those stronger than her by competing for power'. Even Germanicus (in Tacitus' account) is worried that Agrippina's sense of entitlement might get her (and her

family) into trouble. At the beginning of *Annals* book 3, Agrippina makes a dramatic return to the port of Brundisium and thence on to Rome with the ashes of Germanicus. Back in Rome, intense public mourning for Germanicus and sympathy for Agrippina only serve to increase antipathy on the part of Tiberius and Livia to the widow and her children. Agrippina is acclaimed as 'The nation's glory, the sole survivor of Augustus' blood-line, the only remaining model of the past' (*Ann.* 3.4); although in this instance her behaviour is irreproachably feminine, her popularity – and her descent from Augustus – make her a threat.

Walking a dangerous line

In Tacitus' narrative the proper place for political decision-making is the senate; the transmission of power through inheritance (a process in which women – notably Agrippina – have a critical role) is intrinsically problematic. Though Tiberius is deeply flawed, Agrippina, who challenges him, incautiously parading her connection to Augustus, is a woman who fails to know her place, aspiring to what is a man's role (and showing up Roman men in the process). Nevertheless, in a narrative dominated by suspicion, deceit and second-guessing, in which virtually all other characters work hard to dissemble their true feelings, in a Rome increasingly caught up in the machinations of Sejanus, Agrippina, though proud, incautious, and often ill-advised, stands out for saying what she thinks.

Though Agrippina's sons acquire greater prominence and honours in the wake of the death of Drusus (Tiberius' own son, who might have been expected to succeed him), such prominence exposes them to greater dangers. A recurrent theme of book 4 of the *Annals* is the gradual isolation of Agrippina and her eldest son Nero (not to be confused with the later emperor, his nephew, discussed below) from their friends and supporters. A series of encounters between Agrippina and Tiberius mark a drastic turn for the worse in her fortunes. When Agrippina's cousin and friend Claudia Pulchra is charged (*Ann.* 4.52) with adultery and

treason, on the initiative of senators keen to ingratiate themselves by undermining those thought to be Tiberius' enemies, Agrippina, in protest, accosts Tiberius. She comes upon him in the act of offering sacrifices to the divine Augustus. 'This aroused her indignation; the same person should not be offering sacrifices to the deified Augustus and also persecuting his descendants, she declared. Augustus' divine spirit was not to be found in his stone likeness – she was his true image, a descendant of his heavenly blood!' For once Tiberius is provoked to speak out; seizing hold of Agrippina, he quotes a line of Greek verse: 'It was not mistreatment that she did not rule'.

It is Sejanus' intervention, however, which seals Agrippina's fate (according to Tacitus). He sends agents warning of a plan to poison her; she should avoid dining with Tiberius. Fatally incapable of dissembling, Agrippina, reclining at table next to the emperor, would not touch her food, passing on to her slaves untasted a piece of fruit which Tiberius had personally handed to her. The emperor interprets this as an accusation of poisoning, commenting to his mother that stern measures against Agrippina are evidently justified. Sejanus picks off Agrippina's one remaining friend, the equestrian Sabinus, tricked into expressing his criticism of Sejanus in the hearing of witnesses concealed in the cramped roof-space of an aristocratic house; the case generates an atmosphere of terrified mistrust throughout the city (*Ann.* 4.68–70).

From bad to worse

Book 4 concludes with notice of what seems (for once) an auspicious event for Agrippina's family. Her eldest daughter (also called Agrippina) is betrothed by Tiberius to Gnaeus Domitius, a man of consular status from one of Rome's grandest families (indeed Augustus was his great-uncle). This looks like good news – until we consider the identity of their future offspring – a boy who would eventually become the emperor Nero.

More obviously ominous is another notice, a few lines earlier. At §71 Tacitus reports the death of Augustus' granddaughter Julia, exiled twenty years previously for adultery to an island off the coast of Apulia. This Julia is Agrippina's sister. The death of their mother, the Elder Julia (Augustus' daughter), after decades languishing in exile for adultery and treason was reported at *Ann.* 1.53; she may or may not have starved herself to death on the forlorn island of Pandateria. Like her mother and sister, Agrippina (charges against whom in A.D. 29 are reported at *Ann.* 5.3) would meet a wretched end in exile, also on the island of Pandateria; Suetonius reports that she was beaten so badly that she lost an eye. In his account

of events of A.D. 33, Tacitus comments (*Ann.* 6.25): 'she took her own life – unless food was denied her so that her death might appear to have been voluntary'. For once, something about Agrippina is ambiguous; it might have been embarrassing for Tiberius to be thought directly responsible for her death.

After branding as absurd Tiberius' claims that Agrippina had had a love affair with Asinius Gallus, Tacitus (*Ann.* 6.25) sums up her character: '

intolerant of equality and desiring power, she had thrown off female weaknesses, developing masculine ambitions.

Agrippina the Elder, as Tacitus portrays her, displays a potent and misplaced ambition which foreshadows that of her daughter; more calculating than her mother, the Younger Agrippina would live to see her son Nero become emperor. She, too, would come to a wretched end, however, killed on her own son's orders. Tacitus' narrative brings out the murderous internal logic of dynasty, a logic which manifests itself particularly in the anomalous, masculine ambitions of Augustus' female descendants. These women are a disturbing symptom of a pathological politics; we may sometimes admire them but cannot be surprised when they come to a bad end.

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